

English Teachers Condemn English Test for Citizenship

“The Government’s proposed English test for Citizenship is a divisive, retrograde, unnecessary and costly mistake”, the President of the Australian Council of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Associations, Dr Michael Michell, said today.

“Minister Dutton has said the test will be at Level 6 (or equivalent) of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Requiring this level will **discriminate against people with poor literacy skills, large numbers of migrant and refugee women (who often have limited access to education), and those unused to taking high-stakes tests.** Children born overseas to migrants who fail or do not sit the test **will be ineligible for student loans for University or TAFE.**

“Newly arrived migrants cannot achieve this level within their initial 510 hour entitlement for Adult Migrant English. If their English is above IELTS Level 4, they are already ineligible for these classes. For most, reaching Level 6 will require years of expensive tuition, including test-taking skills.

“Currently, it costs \$330-400 each time to sit an English test. Is the Government proposing to pay for this? If not, this cost will bar many, not least those who fail the test and will have to try again.

“ACTA believes that those involved in implementing the proposed test for citizenship purposes will **be in breach of the International Language Testing Association’s Ethical Principles. These professional standards prohibit use of ‘professional knowledge or skills to advance purposes inimical to ... [the] test takers’ interests’.**

“The proposed English test coincides with **new 2017-2020 contracts for the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) that have substantively undermined and destabilised the program.** People with no teaching qualifications can now be employed to teach some groups, while some AMEP contracts have gone to organisations with no track record or expertise in English teaching.

Quality programs have also lost out. Most notably, in the Melbourne metropolitan area a long-standing provider of exemplary programs that gives refugee youth opportunities for training and education, and social integration through links to sporting bodies and the arts community has just lost their contract (– see photo below). The programs cease on 30th June. Such programs are consistently being recommended as solutions to the problem of so-called “migrant youth” anti-social behaviour in a current Parliamentary Inquiry on Migrant Settlement.

The Government’s proposed English test raises major hurdles for migrants at the very same time as it is eroding the English language programs they desperately need. Enshrining this barrier in its new Citizenship legislation creates a sure pathway to a long term underclass without the vote in Australia.

“Linking poor English with Australian security and potential acts of terrorism is not only unfounded, but also **insulting to those migrants and refugees with limited English who contribute to our society and economy.** Those who have struggled to make decent lives for themselves and their children are now being told they are not good enough to become citizens and vote in the place where they have made their home and to which they have committed their futures.”

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Youth students who created the drama 'Back to the Future' at La Mama Theatre, Melbourne, in December 2015